

The case of Hiring for the Future: Using of training & development as a tool for organizational change

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The important question is not how do you get out of this problem, but how did you get into the problem in the first place

Stan Deetz

It is interesting how different aspects of our lives intersect in ways that provide unique opportunities to make positive contributions toward organizational change. In graduate school I made a decision that did not impress my professors, to focus my attention on organizational communication and have an outside area of training and development. I distinctly remember a conversation with a professor who told me that communication training was a prostitution of our scholarship. I disagreed, arguing that educating undergraduates was a fine enterprise, but in order to enact change in organizational practices called for educating managers and executives through effective training and development. For this essay, I have chosen to describe an engaged scholarship project I lead at my university in an attempt to help us fulfill an espoused, but not achieved, goal of diversifying our faculty. I am telling this particular story because I think it is one that many of us can relate to—an aggravating tension in our university lives—the unique aspect of this story is the happy ending that was achieved by effective implementation of communication scholarship.

In the fall of 2004. As the academic year began, I was contacted by the new Dean of our College of Liberal Studies (CLS) and asked to accept his invitation to become a member of the college's Diversity Committee. The CLS is the only college on our campus to have such a committee and it was formed to facilitate the college's commitment to diversity. That year the Diversity Committee was charged with investigating the homogeneity of applicant pools produced by the college's hiring committees. The applicant pools continued to be homogeneous in spite of a commitment to diversity that was demonstrated in a variety of the CLS's policies and reward structures. I accepted the invitation and at the first committee meeting, based on my scholarly interest in recruitment & retention and training & development, I was elected chair of the committee.

As the committee sifted through the demographic data on the college's faculty as well as responses to a campus climate survey, it became obvious that the organizational problem we were assigned was a deep, rich and complex one. Unfortunately, the previously mentioned traditional assessment tools simply identified the existence of the problem, but we needed to uncover the obstacles to the achievement of the college's commitment to diversity. Fortunately, the previous summer I was introduced to a unique approach to identifying organizational tensions and present communicative strategies for managing them. The CLS Diversity Committee's charge provided an opportunity to test the efficacy of using this approach as a new way to conduct a needs analysis to inform training and development seminars designed to address complex organizational issues.

In this essay I will address the case of building a training and development seminar for the purpose of creating a paradigm shift in the process and practices of hiring committees in a university's College of Liberal Studies. First, I will describe how the College of Liberal Studies Diversity Committee used an adaptation of Deetz's (1982) three step approach for researching organizational communication as a needs-analysis process for a complex organizational tension. Next, I will describe the outcomes of our needs analysis which uncovered four themes that demonstrated how hiring committee member's thoughts, emotions and behaviors were influenced in ways that hindered the college's achievement of its commitment to diversifying the faculty. Third, I will address how the needs-analysis was used to develop and facilitate a training

and development seminar designed to provide hiring committees with new language, a new process, and communicative strategies to improve the quality of hiring tenure-track faculty. Finally, I will address the results of seminar evaluation and describe how the success of the seminar has led to a new university-wide recruitment and retention initiative.

Adapting the Deetz (1982) model

In the summer of 2004 I attended the Engaging Theory: Transforming Organizations conference in Aspen CO. Stan Deetz presented a keynote address titled *Grounding our theory: Theorizing our practice* in which he laid out a three step process to identifying organizational tensions. While these three steps were originally outlined as an approach to organizational communication research (Deetz, 1982) they sounded to me like a uniquely communicative approach to an organizational needs analysis. As a qualitative researcher, I have often struggled with the quantitative plan-need-analysis approaches advocated in training & development and consulting models of organizational analysis. I have been looking for a framework that demonstrates the deep, rich, and complex issues involved in most organizational communication phenomena. Deetz (2004) outlined three steps involved in identifying, addressing, and living with organizational tensions:

1. *Gaining an understanding of the organizational tension* (identified as a “richer understanding of naturally occurring events” in the 1982 article).
2. *Critique of the social/historical forces that influence thoughts, experiences, emotions, and behaviors* (identified as “criticism of false consensus and the forces which sustain them” in the 1982 article).
3. *Invention of language*—we should try to create new vocabularies for those involved in the organizational tension that would allow us to talk in communication terms and in terms of consequences, rather than the traditional dichotomy of problems and solutions (identified as “the expansion of the conceptual base from which organizational members think and work” in the 1982 article).

These three steps grounded our need analysis, informed our discussions, and guided the process we crafted for addressing the tensions involved in our college’s recruitment practices.

Process and outcomes of needs-analysis

Several members of the CLS Diversity Committee uniquely understood the challenges associated with being an underrepresented population faculty member on our campus. Therefore, to begin the process of gaining an understanding of organizational tensions involved in diversifying our faculty, we listened to the lived experiences of the underrepresented population members of the committee. Next, these committee members used their intersubjective understanding to guide interviews with other underrepresented faculty members within the CLS. Identifying the tensions not only provided the Diversity Committee with a deep and rich understanding of the lived experience of being a underrepresented population faculty member in our college, but also inspired the members of the committee to find a way to address these tensions. While understanding the lived experiences of our underrepresented population faculty clarified the intensity of the organizational tensions, it did not uncover the historical forces that influence the thoughts, experiences, emotions, and behaviors of faculty hiring committee members.

In order to inform our criticism of the current hiring practices, we looked to three texts dealing with diversity and university hiring (Smith, Wolf, & Busenberg, 1996; Turner, 2000; Turner & Meyer, 2002). Additionally, we interviewed members of two different constituencies:

the academic deans and associate deans of the university's three colleges and members of several CLS faculty hiring committees. When the committee met and discussed what we found in these interviews, the immediate impression was that we did not learn much from the interviews. One committee member described what we learned as "the standard operating procedures" which spoke to our experiences as members of hiring committees. However, when the committee was reminded that our goal was to *uncover* the historical factors that influence the practices that produced our current organizational tension, the tone and content of the discussion changed. We began to question the traditional practices and rationales of the colleges' hiring committees.

Four themes emerged, demonstrating how hiring committee members' thoughts, emotions and behaviors were influenced in ways that hindered our chances to diversify the faculty. The first theme that emerged was that the generally articulated reason for hiring (and therefore the forming of the committee) was to **replace** a particular faculty member. The **replacement mentality** permeated committees and increased the likelihood that the most attractive applicants for positions were those who appeared most like the faculty member being replaced. Additionally, job announcements were often "recycled." If a search was successfully (hired a faculty member), it was assumed that the job announcement must have been effective and the department would only adapt it to accurately represent the job responsibilities involved in the new hire. The recycling of job announcements and a "replacement" mentality on a campus where the majority of faculty members are white males was unlikely to produce a diverse set of applicants brought in for on-campus interviews.

The second theme that emerged was that the purpose of the committee was framed as a **search and screen** process. This process was described by one interviewee as "to cast a wide net, hope for a large catch, and pick out the best-suited candidates." It was considered important to get the position announcement published in a major academic outlet such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education* or the classified section of the newsletter for the disciplines international and/or national association. An example of the pervasiveness of this attitude was the academic dean who pointed to the cost of posting job announcements in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* as a demonstration of his college's commitment to diversifying their faculty. On the face of it, the search and screen model appears objective, fair and rational (much like the academic blind review process). However, according to Turner (2000), such an approach to hiring faculty is actually more likely to produce pools of candidates that are stagnant and homogenous.

The third theme that emerged was that the role of faculty search and screen committee members was to **objectively judge** the quality of the pool of applicants. The university demonstrates its commitment by casting the widest net (posting in a major academic outlet) and the committee members select the most attractive candidate. However, when hiring committee members described the process involved in selecting candidates for the on-campus interview, the process did not appear to build a relationship with the "most attractive" candidates culminating with the on-campus interview. In fact, the process most likely involved the task of whittling down the field, often arguing for removal of candidates rather than approval. The process of choosing candidates for on-campus interviews was an act of attrition, producing a narrow set of applicants and those "chosen" candidates for on-campus interviews were unaware of why they were picked.

The final theme that emerged involved the preparation for members of hiring committees—there was none. In fact, the **lack of preparation** made the experience of being on a hiring committee a frustrating one. To paraphrase one interviewee's response, we are trained in

graduate school to be scholars in our field, some of us get to learn how to teach by practicing it as a graduate teaching assistant, however, no one every told me how to be an effective member of a hiring committee. The way most learned about being a hiring committee member was by being one, observing the actions of “veteran” members of the committee, and asking questions of those with more experience.

The four themes that emerged provided an empirical basis for our critique of the social/historical forces that influenced the thoughts, experiences, emotions, and behaviors of hiring committee members. We found that the CLS commitment to diversity was not being purposefully subverted, rather a series of well intentioned acts diminished the likelihood of its achievement. When departments found that they had an opportunity to hire a new faculty member based on an existing member leaving they fell into a replacement mentality and put together a hiring committee consisting of members with and without previous experience on hiring committees. In an attempt to insure the hiring committee succeeded in their task, they recycled a job announcement from a previous, successful hire. In order to be objective and provide equal opportunities to all applicants, hiring committees and their academic deans cast a wide net by placing job announcements in publication outlets that reach a wide academic audience. After the application deadline expired, committee members (hoping to replace the previous faculty member) whittled down the field of applicants to a set of candidates who would be invited to an on-campus interview without unduly influencing the committee by having conversations with those candidates prior to them coming to campus. These practices actually increased the likelihood of a stagnant and homogenous set of candidates who were brought to campus for an interview.

Development and facilitation of training and development seminar

In order to counteract the social/historical forces imbedded in our colleges hiring practices, we needed to create new vocabularies for those involved in the organizational tension that would allow us to talk in communication terms and in terms of consequences, rather than the traditional dichotomy of problems and solutions (Deetz, 2004). Additionally, we needed to have a vehicle for transformation that would be supported by the university, demonstrating a commitment to the new vocabulary and providing new strategies and practices for hiring committees. We determined that the greatest inhibitor to the college’s commitment to diversifying the faculty was the lack of education, preparation, and training for search and screen committees. Therefore, based on my training and development background, I was charged with the task of preparing and facilitating a training and development seminar that would be required of all department and search and screen chairs in the CLS who were hiring in the 2005-06 academic year. Over the summer I crafted the seminar and received feedback from members of the CLS Diversity Committee and CLS Dean’s office. In the fall of 2005 I facilitated a three and a half hour seminar to the department chairs, search and screen chairs, and any other campus members who decided to attend. The seminar was offered twice in order to meet the diverse scheduling needs on our campus. A total of 49 individuals participated in the seminar, representing the 18 approved tenure-track CLS searches and interested faculty, staff, and administrative personnel.

The new vocabulary designed for the tensions experienced by hiring committee members framed the process as a future-oriented, communication-based, relationship-building one. The title of the seminar, *Hiring for the Future: Excellence and Diversity*, was intended to convey the commitment to hiring the most qualified candidate, from a deep and diverse pool, based on how this individual would impact the future of the department, college, and university. The future-

orientation frame was a direct attempt to refocus the reason for hiring from *replacement* to ***enhancing the department in ways that prepare us for the future***. Such an orientation to the hiring process was intended to increase the likelihood that the qualifications of candidates were not based on mirroring the person who had left the department. Rather, the new frame focused attention on how an applicant could qualitatively change/diversify the composition of the faculty in the department. The hope was that such an orientation would produce an applicant pool that was deep, rich, and diverse and make the process of selecting candidates an act of elevation rather than an act of attrition.

The purpose of the hiring committee was reframed as well. The CLS Diversity Committee felt that the frame of *search and screen* committees coupled with the *replacement mentality* increased the likelihood of an unenthusiastic hiring process. Such a process would likely produce a set of stagnant and homogeneous candidates who were brought to campus with little understanding of the department, college, university, and the role they would play if hired. Therefore, the purpose of hiring committees was reframed to a ***recruit and persuade*** model. The recruit and persuade model called for reframing the role of committee members as well. Rather than simply acting as *objective judges of the quality of candidates* committee members were now asked to ***engage in dialogue*** with candidates. This model provided a process for continually increasing communication between candidates and the members of the committee. The process focused on building relationships, and culminated in an on-campus interview that provided candidates the opportunity to demonstrate how their unique and impacting qualities would enhance the department, college, and university.

It became apparent to the committee that what we were advocating would call for a paradigm shift in the way our faculty thought about the activities of hiring committees. As such, we could not simply rely on the traditional training and development goals of cognitive and behavioral change (citation needed here). We would need to achieve an affective, value-based (citation needed here), change in which participants would see the worth of a new approach to the activities of a hiring committee before participants would be prepared to accept the needed learning (cognitive) about strategies that would be demonstrated in behavioral change. Therefore, the seminar was built to open the committee to rethink the reasons and purpose of a hiring committee and then teach new strategies and communication behaviors. The following goals guided the *Hiring for the Future: Excellence and Diversity* seminar and demonstrate the attempt to move participants from affective change to cognitive change and finally behavioral change:

1. To *VIEW* the role of search and screen committees as a future-oriented, exciting, and impacting opportunity (affective goal).
2. To *LEARN* about strategies for recruiting deep and rich pools of quality candidates (cognitive goal).
3. To *RECOGNIZE* that effective hiring practices demand other-oriented communication skills (cognitive to behavioral goal).
4. To *DEMONSTRATE* an appreciation for & willingness to engage in practices that are in line with the college's desire to diversify our faculty (behavioral goal).

The order of the goals represents how the seminar was framed and was used to structure the content of the seminar as well. Therefore, the seminar facilitator concentrated on achieving the affective goals early in the seminar, then introduced the cognitive content, and finally engaged the participants in activities that demonstrated recruit and persuade communication behaviors.

In order to effectively use the recruit and persuade model, a five step process for hiring committees was introduced. These five steps are intended to produce an excellent and diverse pool of applicants, who built relationships with the committee, provided an opportunity for candidates to demonstrate their unique qualities, and increased the likelihood of a hire that would enhance and diversify the department, college, and university. A variety of reflective and brainstorming activities were used to teach the new concepts and to test the participants' level of understanding and ability to implement the new communication behaviors. These activities were carefully designed to achieve the seminar goals and the three hour and thirty minute time allotted for the seminar.

Evaluation and recruitment and retention initiative

Three evaluation tools were used to assess the efficacy of the *Hiring for the Future: Excellence and Diversity* seminar. The first, an informal evaluation, was designed to assess the degree to which participant's needs were met by the seminar content, structure, activities, and packet material. For this evaluation participants were asked during the icebreaker activity to identify something they hoped to get from attending the seminar. The facilitator listed these items on a flip chart and at the end of the seminar asked for confirmation that each item was addressed to the satisfaction of the participants. At the completion of the seminar all items had been satisfactorily addressed. The second form of evaluation was distributed at the completion of the seminar. This evaluation used a seven-point Likert scale and asked participants to assess the degree to which each of the seminar goals were met, the content, structure, & utility of the seminar, and the efficacy of the facilitator at engaging the participants in the seminar. The composite score for all items was between a 6.0-6.6 on a 7 point scale indicating a high degree of satisfaction with the seminar. The final and most important form of evaluation was the results of the hiring committees. Of the 18 searches in the CLS for the 2005-06 year, 15 were successful in landing a tenure-track faculty member. According to the CLS Dean, the normal success rates of the college's tenure track searches was between 65-70% making the 83% success rate was an unexpected improvement over the norm. The success rate of searches indicated excellence in the hiring process. The commitment to diversifying the college was demonstrated by the fact that seven of the 15 hires brought diversity to the faculty according to the standards set by our Office of Affirmative Action and Diversity. The 46% of hires who brought diversity to the CLS faculty was seen as an important step in diversifying the faculty. Based on these three forms of assessment the CLS Dean determined the *Hiring for the Future: Excellence and Diversity* seminar to be a success.

The success of the seminar led to a university-wide recruitment and retention initiative promoted by the university Provost and sponsored by the Office of Affirmative Action and Diversity. The *Hiring for the Future: Excellence & Diversity* seminar has been identified as recruitment portion of this initiative and after being adapted to a three part process is required for all tenure-track hiring committee chairs. The first part of the process is a one-hour facilitated discussion about how to craft an effective and welcoming job announcement in order to increase the depth and diversity of applicant pools. The second part of the process is a two-hour seminar that addresses the affective goal, introduces the concept of the recruit and retain model and covers the first three of the five step process. The third seminar lasts an hour & a half and focuses on building relationships with the candidates. The third seminar frames the on-campus interview as an act of persuasion and identifies ways to make job offers as well as how to welcome the new hire to the department, campus, and community. Last year the CLS piloted a mentoring program that paired new faculty members with a mentor from another department.

This program was designed to provide opportunities for open discussion and to help new faculty develop relationships with tenured faculty on our campus. This year we have expanded the scope of the *Hiring for the Future: Excellence and Diversity* to include the chairs of all faculty and staff hiring committees. Additionally, we are piloting a program designed to help prepare university departments to use the probationary period of the tenure-track to help new faculty develop as academics (integrating teaching, scholarship, and service) and members of the campus community.

As mentioned in the introduction to this essay, I find it interesting how the different aspects of our lives intersect in ways that provide unique opportunities to make positive contributions toward organizational change. The case I offered here not only has helped our campus address necessary organizational changes, it has positively influenced my career and connection to my campus community. First, facilitating these seminars to faculty from all areas of my college provided me a unique opportunity to become a “known” faculty member during the probationary period of my tenure-track appointment. When the seminar was proposed for all faculty searches across the university I suddenly found myself in front of administrators from all areas of the campus as well as regularly meeting with our Chancellor and Provost to describe and answer questions about the seminar. I sincerely believe that the exposure I received as the facilitator of this seminar was a positive influence in my gaining Associate Professor status prior to tenure and facilitated my achievement of tenure as both of these decisions are made by committees composed of faculty and administrators from every area of the campus. In the end the intersections described in this paper came together to promote positive organizational changes and positively impacted my career and connection to the campus community. I know that many communication faculty members have the knowledge and skill necessary to promote organizational change and hope that they recognize and take advantage of the opportunities afforded by preparing and facilitating training and development seminars that will improve their campus communities.

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